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Citation

Early, Gerald, Glenda Rossanna Carpio and Werner Sollors. 2010. Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition Summer, 2010: 1-13.

Permanent link

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Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition

Werner Sollors

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“Black humor literature is similar to the literature of existentialism in that it begins with the same assumption—that the world is absurd.” This is how Alan R. Pratt defines the term in the introduction to his edited collection, *Black Humor: Critical Essays*. He then illustrates his definition with a passage from Jean-Paul Sartre. Postmodern authors, most notably Thomas Pynchon, are among the best practitioners of black humor literature. Pratt also offers a number of alternative terms for black humor, among them apocalyptic comedy, dark comedy, pathological comedy, nihilistic humor, tragic farce, and comedy of the absurd.¹

In his book *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) the late historian Lawrence Levine highlights how absurd the rules were that governed the worlds of slavery and Jim Crow and how this very absurdity invited numerous African American jokes that were recorded long before existentialism. This gives the term *black humor* a specifically racial meaning and context in America.

Levine mentions the “story of a slave who was caught killing and eating one of his master’s pigs and who mockingly rationalized his act by arguing, “Yes, suh, Massa, you got less pig now but you sho’ got more nigger.”² Here the principle of ownership is turned against itself by a witty slave.

Levine also tells of the white deacon in Mississippi who walks into his church and finds a Negro standing there. “Boy,” he calls out. “What you doin’ in here? Don’t you know this is a white church?” “Boss, I only just got sent here to mop up the floor,” the black man informs him. “Well, that’s all right then,” the deacon responds. “But don’t let me catch you prayin’.”³ The punch line speaks volumes about Jim Crow religious hypocrisy.

The witty repartee seems to restore justice within the realm of humor for a second, fending off the possibility that outsiders will “get” black humor at the expense of blacks (as Gerald Early put it) and giving whites the uneasy feeling that somehow they have been lampooned by black laughter (as Glenda Carpio said). Many other jokes suggest the insurmountability of the burden of race by taking for granted the absurdity of the world made by slaveholders and segregationists.

Glenda Carpio writes in *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008) that “African American humor has been, for centuries, a humor of survival. It has been a safety valve, a mode of minimizing pain and defeat, as well as a medium capable of expressing grievance and grief in the most artful and incisive ways.”⁴

A black man is going to the voting booth to cast his vote. The sheriff tells him, “Boy, first you’ve got to pass a reading test. Read out this here headline,” and he hands him . . . a Chinese newspaper. As if he were reading the headline, the black man slowly and deliberately enunciates, “Negroes won’t vote in Mississippi again this year.” The response is ingenious, in part because it acknowledges the continuation of the grievance of voter disenfranchisement.

A conductor who tells a Negro passenger to go to the Jim Crow car gets this reply: “I done quit the race.” Here the humor points to the strange fact that unlike pretty much all other social categories, being a Negro is apparently not one that can be shed.

Looking through my library catalog, I found a book called *Black Humor* (Figure 1), which was humorously located on the Black Power shelf. Published in 1970, it was authored by Charles Johnson, who later became a National Book Award–winning novelist. (Anyone interested in black humor should be sure to read Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*.) *Black Humor*, a short book of cartoons, contains inappropriate-seeming pages on slavery and its legacy. For example, the caption under a sketch showing figures in the hull of a slave ship reads, “Say, why don’t we have a sing-along?” (Figure 2). A cartoon of a slave auction shows a man holding a placard proclaiming, “We carry trading stamps” (Figure 3). Similarly, a two-panel cartoon shows a Klansman kneeling at his bedside (Figures 4–5). He prays, “Give me the strength to eliminate the inferior people ruining my nation.” The next panel shows God’s apparent answer, ironic and subversive: “Sho’ nuff, boss!” As Bill Cosby has said, God clearly has a sense of humor.

One of the cartoons has acquired a particular poignancy in the past year. A father and mother are shown observing their young son, who is jumping on a (white) doll. The caption below the image reads, “He may never be president, but he’ll make a great militant.” (Figure 6)

As “a mode of minimizing pain and defeat, as well as a medium capable of expressing grievance and grief,” versions of black humor permeate American culture, as is visible in *A New Literary History of America*, a book I had the pleasure to coedit with Greil Marcus.⁵ The book represents America in 219 chronologically arranged essays

written by 201 authors, among them Glenda Carpio on Thomas Pynchon and Gerald Early on *The Wizard of Oz*, Tarzan, and integrating the military.

The specific black humor strain in *A New Literary History of America* appears in W. T. “Rip” Lhamon’s essay “Rogue Blackness” (1830), which argues that Melville was reacting to the minstrel show number “The Black Barber” when he penned the literally double-edged scene in which the slave rebel Babo holds the razor against Captain Delano’s neck: “The famous shaving scene at the center of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’ (1855) tried to live up to the grave humor that Dan Emmett and Eph Horn had been performing on the minstrel stage for a decade and a half. This same blackface-derived shaving scene would still be reincarnate in Charles Chesnutt’s ‘The Doll’ (1912).”⁶ Lhamon also finds that the opening words of Frederick Douglass’s first autobiography (1845) copped Jim Crow’s come-on:

Rice: “Come listen all you galls and boys / I’s jist from Tuckyhoe.”
Douglass: “I was born in Tuckahoe.”⁷

Lhamon goes on to speculate whether Douglass, like Thomas Rice, was thinking of that other Tuckahoe, the Virginia plantation that was the boyhood home of Thomas Jefferson, Mr. “Created Equal” himself.⁸

John Edgar Wideman, who wrote the essay on Charles W. Chesnutt for *A New Literary History of America*, comments that Chesnutt and Ralph Ellison are two authors who have noted with a distinct sense of humor that their “characters commit the unforgiving mistake of allowing themselves to fall asleep within someone else’s dream, the dream that blacks and whites coexist peacefully, voluntarily, in a just, mutually beneficial arrangement. The wake-up call of riots, Ellison’s staged in Harlem and

Chesnutt's set in Wellington, North Carolina, expose the dream's fragility."⁹ One of the microstories Wideman contributed to *Best African American Fiction 2010* explores similar themes:

Message

A message in red letters on the back of a jogger's T-shirt passed by too quickly for me to memorize exactly. Something about George Bush going too far in his search for terrorists and WMDs. A punch line sniggering that Bush could have stayed home and found the terrorist he was looking for in the mirror. The message clever, I thought, and jacked the idea for my new line of black-lettered T-shirts: America went way too far looking for slaves. Plenty niggers in the mirror for sale.¹⁰

The "mirror" or "tarbaby" effect of white "hallucinatory" perception of blacks is also apparent in novelist Ishmael Reed's essay in *A New Literary History of America* on Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an essay that begins with the ironic comment that "structurally" the novel "is about as solid as a New Orleans levee" and ends with a passage rarely highlighted in discussions of Huck Finn:

Huck cries, "I want my nigger," like the children of the suburbs who are addicted to gangster rap, like the white Southern children after the Civil War who craved their coon songs from New York. Twain exposes this bizarre hunger, this exotic yearning of those who despise blacks yet wish to imitate them. Who wish to be called "honey" by them. Who wish to be "petted" by them. Who wish to burn them, cut out their very entrails, and take them home with them. If you can't give us our nigger, they seem to say, we'll make do with Elvis. . . . Twain knew. *I want my nigger!*¹¹

George Schuyler must be the godfather of black humor. His thoroughly irreverent novel *Black No More* (1931) is unsurpassed for its raucous jokes about the joke that is race. Jeffrey Ferguson (who wrote the entry on Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* in *A New Literary History of America*) finds in his study of Schuyler that the wisdom "of black humor, . . . resided in its sharp recognition of the ludicrous and outlandish in American

race relations.”¹² This ludicrousness is present in many of the essays in *A New Literary History of America*, from Walter Mosley’s reflections on “hard-boiled” prose to Monica Miller’s comments on Zora Neale Hurston’s rather different vein of humor.¹³

In 2001, conceptual artist Keith Townsend Obadike offered a version of the “I done quit the race” conundrum for the eBay era (Figure 7). Obadike put his blackness up for sale on the eBay auction site, a move that revisits the problem of voting and is also a self-reflexive comment on black humor itself. Sarcastically alluding to the legacy of slave auctions and to the racialism that makes “blackness” precisely a quality one can never shed, and following ordinary eBay conventions, Obadike gives potential buyers the following information:

Mr. Obadike’s Blackness has been used primarily in the United States and its functionality outside of the US cannot be guaranteed. Buyer will receive a certificate of authenticity. . . . Benefits: . . . 2. This Blackness may be used for writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks. 3. This Blackness may be used for making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably. . . . 4. This Blackness may be used for accessing some affirmative action benefits. (Limited time offer. May already be prohibited in some areas.) 5. This Blackness may be used for dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny. 6. This Blackness may be used for gaining access to exclusive, “high risk” neighborhoods. 7. This Blackness may be used for securing the right to use the terms ‘sista’, ‘brotha’, or ‘nigga’ in reference to black people. (Be sure to have certificate of authenticity on hand when using option.) . . . 9. This Blackness may be used to augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing ‘blacker-than-thou’. . . . Warnings: 1. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during legal proceedings of any sort. 2. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while seeking employment. . . . 5. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while making intellectual claims. 6. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida.¹⁴

The auction was held in August 2001 but was removed by eBay after only four days for inappropriateness. “Keith Obadike’s Blackness” had attracted twelve bidders and the highest bid was \$152.50 when it was pulled.

Perhaps it does take an existentialist's black humor to make sense of race in America.

¹ Alan R. Pratt, ed., *Black Humor: Critical Essays* (New York: Garland, 1993), xvii.

² Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 309.

³ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁴ Glenda R. Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 230–231.

⁵ Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds., *A New Literary History of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁶ W. T. Lhamon, Jr., "Rogue Blackness," in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Marcus and Sollors, 204.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ John Edgar Wideman, "Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*," in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Marcus and Sollors, 464.

¹⁰ John Edgar Wideman, "Microstories," in *Best African American Fiction 2010*, ed. Gerald Early and Nikki Giovanni (New York: Random House, 2009), 180–191.

¹¹ Ishmael Reed, "Mark Twain's Hairball," in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Marcus and Sollors, 380, 384.

¹² Jeffrey Ferguson, *The Sage of Sugar Hill: George S. Schuyler and the Harlem Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 32. See also Jeffrey Ferguson,

“Sinclair Lewis,” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Marcus and Sollors, 580–584.

¹³ Walter Mosley, “Poisonville,” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Marcus and Sollors, 598–602; and Monica Miller, ““The Self-Respect of My People,”” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Marcus and Sollors, 852–856.

¹⁴ Keith Townsend Obadike, “Keith Obadike’s Blackness” (2001), <http://obadike.tripod.com/ebay.html>.